

FIRST READING – C BAPTISM OF THE LORD

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Pause - and look up at the assembly

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!”

See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his reward before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Pause for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

SECOND READING – C BAPTISM OF THE LORD

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to Titus.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Beloved:

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,
training us to renounce sinfulness and worldly passions,
and in the present age to live lives
that are self-controlled, upright, and godly,
while we wait for the blessed hope
and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour,
Jesus Christ.

He it is who gave himself for us
that he might redeem us from all iniquity
and purify for himself a people of his own
who are eager for good deeds.

For when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared,
he saved us,
not because of any works of righteousness that we had done,
but according to his mercy,
through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.
This Spirit he poured out on us richly
through Jesus Christ our Saviour,
so that, having been justified by his grace,
we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

PAUSE for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING – C BAPTISM OF THE LORD

The Lord be with you.

And with your spirit.

A reading from the holy gospel according to Luke.

Glory to you, O Lord.

As the people were filled with expectation,
and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John,
whether he might be the Messiah,
John answered all of them by saying,
“I baptize you with water;
but one who is more powerful than I is coming;
I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”
Now when all the people were baptized,
and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,
the heaven was opened,
and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.
And a voice came from heaven,
“You are my Son, the Beloved;
with you I am well pleased.”



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURE IN DEPTH

In the Eastern Church, the primary emphasis of Epiphany was theological rather than historical: the epiphany of God in the humanity of the incarnate One. Indeed, the whole life of Christ was a series of epiphanies, of which his baptism was the first and most important.

The original prominence of the baptismal epiphany was never completely forgotten in the West, but it was relegated to a corner in the liturgy—in the Roman Missal, to the gospel for the octave; in the Book of Common Prayer of 1928, to an office lesson.

The revisers of the calendar could hardly have been expected to restore the baptism to its Eastern prominence by putting it on the actual day of Epiphany. The story of the Magi is too popular Western Christian lore for that.

In the present calendar, the baptism is celebrated on the Sunday after January 6 if this Sunday does not coincide with Epiphany; if it does coincide, the baptism is transferred to the Monday after Epiphany.

Thus, the feast has regained some prominence, and for this we may be glad. It helps to reinforce the theological, as opposed to the historical, emphasis of our Western Christmas cycle of feasts.

Reading I: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

This is the best known of the prophecies of Second Isaiah. Indeed, it is one of the best known passages of the Old Testament, if for no other reason than its use by Handel in the three opening numbers of *The Messiah*.

Of course, the unknown prophet of the Exile was not consciously thinking of the Christ-event. He had in view the restoration of Israel from the Babylonian Exile around 538 B.C. Cyrus of Persia had won his preliminary victories and the power of Babylon was waning.

The prophet himself, then, is the voice crying in the wilderness. He, according to the reading of the RSV margin (anticipated by the English text of *The Messiah* and certainly to be preferred) is the bearer of good tidings:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O herald of good tidings to Zion;
lift up your voice with strength,
O herald of good tidings to Jerusalem.
(RSV margin)

“Good tidings”—in the Hebrew original this is a verb that later gave us the noun “gospel” in its New Testament sense. The good tidings here is the good news of the impending divine intervention in history bringing about the return from exile.

The prophet envisages this return as a second Exodus, in which miracles similar to those of the first Exodus will be repeated:

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

One might call Second Isaiah the father of typology. Henceforth the Exodus event becomes the type of expected eschatological event and is taken up into the New Testament as the type of the Christ-event itself. It was in this latter sense that this prophecy was applied in the text of The Messiah, and it is in the same sense that we read it today.

Typology is based upon the conviction, not that history repeats itself, but that God's mighty acts in history follow a consistent pattern because God is true to himself and his purpose.

The eschatological event is defined as the revealing of God's glory, a thought that will have profound significance in New Testament theology (see, for example, John 1:14). “Glory” becomes a word of salvation history; it is an event, the event of the active, saving presence of YHWH. YHWH “comes with might.”

If the expected event becomes, in Christian interpretation, the Christ-event, so too, according to the New Testament, the prophet of the Exile foreshadows John the Baptist. He is the “voice” (John 1:23, to be read next week) that cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord” (see today's gospel). His preparatory work that will make a highway for the advent of the Messiah will be his preaching of repentance.

Responsorial Psalm: 104:1b-2, 3-4, 24-25, 27-28, 29b-30

This is a hymn of praise to God for his works in creation. The dominant theology of the Spirit in the wisdom literature (“the Spirit of God fills the world”) stresses the work of the Spirit in the created order.

By contrast, the New Testament concentrates almost exclusively on the eschatological work of the Spirit. The pneumatology of the New Testament is conditioned by its Christology.

When the psalmist speaks of the “renewal” of creation through the Spirit, he is probably thinking of no more than the renewal of nature at springtime.

But in Christian use it can be reinterpreted to mean the eschatological renewal of creation, a renewal of which the Church is the first fruits.

Reading II: Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

(The first half of) this passage (Titus 2:11-14) speaks of the two comings of Christ: (1) the grace of God has appeared that is. in the Christ-event (and Bethlehem marks the inception of its appearance) (2) “awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory...”

The second coming which had been the dominant theme at the beginning of Advent but had receded into the background as the season progressed and the expectation of the birth of Christ took over, is not completely forgotten now that Christmas has come.

For it is only in the light of the second coming that we can celebrate the first coming. People who forget this sentimentalize Christmas into a “Baby Jesus” cult.

In the nativity Christ comes first in great humility in anticipation of his coming again in majesty and great glory. It is especially fitting that this note should be struck at the midnight Mass of Christmas (where Titus 2:11-14 is the second reading), for much of our traditional imagery speaks of the Lord's second coming as taking place at midnight.

This imagery goes back to the parable of the ten virgins: “At midnight there was a cry, ‘Behold, the bridegroom!’” (Matt 25:6).

(The second half of) this reading (Titus 3:4-7—the second reading from the Christmas Mass at Dawn) is very similar to the (passage above). Both passages speak of the “appearance” of divine salvation and can therefore be related fittingly to the nativity.

But there is a difference, too. The earlier passage went on to speak of the second coming and made it the basis of an ethical exhortation. This passage takes a different direction.

The appearance of “God our Savior” in the Christ-event leads to our regeneration and renewal, our rebirth as children of God (see Galatians 4:5-7). Christ is Son of God by right; created human beings forfeited divine filiation by the fall. But Christ has appeared to give us rebirth as children of God.

Gospel: Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Luke has made five major alterations in his Marcan source:

1. He has prefaced his account of John's messianic preaching with the remark that the people were wondering whether John was the Messiah.

2. The second alteration is obscured by the Lectionary's omission of verses 19-20. Here, between the Baptist's messianic preaching and the baptism of Jesus, Luke has in-

serted the account of John's imprisonment, which Mark and Matthew placed after the temptation and just before the beginning of the Galilean ministry (Mark 1:14a par.).

3. Luke has suppressed the statement that it was John who baptized Jesus, and he has put the mention of Jesus' baptism into a subordinate clause (a genitive absolute in Greek, a temporal clause in the RSV: "when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying").

4. Luke omits the statement that Jesus saw "the heavens opened."

5. Luke has added that the Spirit descended upon Jesus "in bodily form."

What is the point of these alterations? It could be that Luke prefers to follow an alternative version of the baptism narrative (Q? A special tradition?).

In favor of Q is the fact of Matthew's and Luke's agreement, against Mark, in the words they use for the "opening" of heaven in verse 21 and for "upon him" in verse 22.

At the same time, it is clear that Luke is seeking to play down John's role in the baptism of Jesus, for Luke, not his non-Markan source, must have been responsible for placing the imprisonment of John before Jesus' baptism.

Why did he do this? Perhaps for polemical reasons similar to those that operated in the Fourth Gospel. But Luke may have had weightier theological motives for suppressing any reference to John's role in Jesus' baptism.

The Baptist, for Luke, is not the "beginning of the gospel," as he is for Mark; rather, the Baptist is the last of the Old Testament prophets, standing at the head of the old age and pointing to the coming One.

Hence the line between the old age and the new runs between the first and second paragraphs of our reading as given in the Lectionary.

As we saw at Christmas, Luke presents the birth of Jesus as *Vorgeschichte*, preparatory history, the bringing into the world and the marking out of the One who was destined to be the epiphany and redemptive act of God.

Thus, the angel at the annunciation promises that he will [future] be called the Son of God. This means that for Luke sonship is not an ontological status but a function that Jesus will embark upon later. The descent of the Spirit and the heavenly voice now inaugurate that function.

Jesus will now embark upon a life of obedience to his eschatological mission, the function that the annunciation narrative had foretold.

Reginald H. Fuller